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Lincoln's Centenary

Speech

of the

Brazilian Ambassador

JOAQUIM NABUCO

at the celebration in Washington of Lincoln's Centenary

organized by the Commissioners of the District of Columbia

February 12th, 1909

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LINCOLN'S CENTENARY

It was not without much hesitation that I accepted to speak by the side of the distinguished men chosen to address you on this great occasion, but when I was told that I would represent here the sentiment of Latin America I felt that that was a call I could not fail to answer.

The presence at this place of any single foreign nation would be a sufficient acknowledgment that Lincoln belongs to all the world. But there are reasons why the other nations of this continent feel themselves more closely associated with him than the rest of the world, and why they owe him the greater gratitude after that of the United States.

We are bound indeed to form with you a political moral unit and no man, after Washington, has done more than Lincoln to strengthen the magnet that attracts us to you. Washington created the American freedom, Lincoln purified it.

Personally I owe to Lincoln not only the choice, but the easy fulfillment of what I consider was my task in life, as it was the task of so many others: the emancipation of the slaves. Nobody indeed could say what would have been the struggle for abolition in Brazil, if, past the middle of the 19th century, a new and powerful Nation had sprung up in America having for its creed the maintenance and the expansion of slavery. Through what Lincoln did, owing to the great light he kindled for all the world with his Proclamation, we

could win our cause without a drop of blood being shed. In fact, we won it in a national embrace, the slave-owners themselves emulating, with the lavishness of their letters of manumission, the action of the laws of freedom, successively enacted.

Lincoln, like Washington, is one of the few great men in history about whom the moral sense of mankind is not divided. His record is throughout one of inspiration. His part at the White House was that of the national Fate. To-day, when one looks from this distance of time to the fields of that terrible Civil War, one sees in them not only the shortest cut, but the only possible road, to a common national destiny. I construe to myself that War as one of those illusions of life, in which men seem to move of their own free will, while they are really playing a tragedy composed by a Providence intent on saving their nation from the course she was pursuing. Nobody can say what would have been the duration of slavery, if the Southern States had not acted as they did. By seceding they doomed it to death and saved themselves. In that way the Secession, although a wholly different episode, will have had in the history of the United States the same effect that had in the history of Rome the secession of the people to the Sacred Mount in the early period of the Republic; that is that of cementing the national unity and of assuring the destiny of the nation for centuries of ever widening power.

Lincoln, with the special sense distributed by the author of that great play to one entrusted with its leading part, saw distinctly that the South was not a nationality, and that it would not think of being one, except during the hallucination of the crisis. If the South had been a nationality, the North with all its

strength would not have subdued it. Neither the American people would care to have a foreign nation attached to its side by conquest, nor a coerced nation, after such a bloody war, would re-enter the Union in the spirit of staying forever, as the South did, once spent the passion that moved it to secede.

I believe such was also the feeling of General Lee during the whole campaign; only he could not utter it, and the secret died with him. But only such a feeling could have kept his surrender free from all bitterness, as if he had only fought a duel of honor for the South. I am glad to speak those words before the great Southern writer, Mr. Nelson Page, whose books do not only tell the gallantry and chivalrousness of the old South, but, like ever so many lacrymatories, shall keep, as undying tears, the poetry of slavery, the charm of that unique tie between the faithful slaves and the grateful master, of whose family they really made part. Nothing is so beautiful to me in the celebration of this first centenary of Lincoln as the tributes of men who represent the noblest spirit of the South.

I came here to say a word, I have said it. With the increased velocity of modern changes, we do not know what the world will be a hundred years hence. For sure, the ideals of the generation of the year 2000 will not be the same of the generation of the year 1900. Nations will then be governed by currents of political thought which we can no more anticipate than the 17th century could anticipate the political currents of the 18th, which still in part sway us. But, whether the spirit of authority, or that of freedom, increases, Lincoln's legend will ever appear more luminous in the amalgamation of centuries, because he supremely incarnated both those spirits. And this veneration for

Lincoln's memory, throughout the world, is bound more and more to center in this City, which was the exclusive theatre of his glory, and which alone could reflect the anxieties and the elations of his heart during the whole performance of his great part in history. For the site of his great national shrine, Washington has the predominant title of being the place of his martyrdom.

I am proud of having spoken here at his first Centennial in the name of Latin America. We all owe to Lincoln the immense debt of having fixed forever the free character of the American civilization.

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